

# How Diabetes Hurts Your Oral Health



Part of the reason diabetes is such a serious disease is its effect on your entire body. Not only can it affect the eyes, heart, kidneys, and nerves, it affects your immune system.

You become more likely to get sick, and when you do need to heal, the entire process is slower than it would be without diabetes. Unfortunately, though, the health problems don't stop there. Diabetes also has a negative effect on your oral health. If you have diabetes, you are more likely to suffer from the following problems:

- ▶ Cavities
- ▶ Delayed healing
- ▶ Fungal infections such as oral candidiasis or thrush
- ▶ Infection
- ▶ Inflammatory skin diseases called lichen planus and lichenoid reactions
- ▶ Periodontal disease
- ▶ Problems with your salivary glands
- ▶ Problems with your taste buds that specifically alter the taste of food

Oral candidiasis is most likely to develop if you have diabetes. Other risk factors include wearing dentures, smoking, high blood glucose levels, and the frequent use of antibiotics. Thrush is more likely to develop when your salivary glands are producing less saliva than normal, and the saliva that is produced has more glucose in it.

Lichen planus involves getting an itchy rash in your mouth or on your skin. Although mild cases involving the mouth don't hurt, not all cases are mild. The lesions can be sensitive to the point of pain, and they can sometimes develop into ulcers. Lichenoid reactions are similar to lichen planus, but they are caused by contact with specific drugs or chemicals. In other words, they are a delayed allergic reaction to medications for arthritis, heart disease, and high blood pressure.

Some of these problems are linked. For example, uncontrolled diabetes causes high glucose levels in saliva. Bacteria love the high glucose, making you more likely to develop both plaque and tooth decay. Plaque becomes tartar, and the tartar causes gum disease because it irritates gum tissue and the diabetes makes you less resistant to any infection. The inflammation and infection of the gum disease become chronic because you are also slower to heal. In short, the less well-controlled diabetes is, the more likely periodontal disease becomes.

Being proactive about your oral health when you have diabetes is the key to preventing many, if not all, of these potential problems. To protect yourself, use the following strategies:

- ▶ Cultivate good oral hygiene. Now more than ever, you should be brushing, flossing, and using mouthwash. You should also be diligent about getting regular, twice-a-year exams so the dentist can examine your teeth and have a dental hygienist clean them professionally.
- ▶ Keep your dentist updated about your diabetes. Your dentist should know that you have diabetes, how well it is being controlled, changes in your medical history, and a complete list of any drugs you take, including both prescription and over-the-counter treatments.
- ▶ Be alert to changes in your own oral health, and contact the dentist immediately if your gums bleed easily; become red, tender, and swollen; pull away from your teeth; you develop pus between your teeth and gums; or if you have a bad taste in your mouth over time or consistent bad breath.

Diabetes is a serious disease, and can be difficult to manage, but that doesn't mean bad oral health is inevitable. You can make a difference in your own situation if you take seriously the need to keep a vigilant eye on your own oral condition.